

THE ROLE OF GENDER IN CHILEAN ARGUMENTATIVE DISCOURSE

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The investigation focused on determining the influence of gender on certain linguistic strategies that promote camaraderie.

Gender was not seen as playing a completely determining role, for although female and male strategy preferences were exhibited, most were aptly employed by both sexes. While both males and females used joint sentence construction equally, females usually favoured overlap, latching, backchannelling, supportive moves and repetition of others but only when they were in the minority or majority.

The use of these strategies was dependent on the number of participants of the same sex in the group. It was quite evident that the frequency and variability of strategy use were affected by a balanced gender ratio combination and by a male majority.

Introduction

The extent to which gender influences our styles of discourse, use of linguistic strategies and mode of interaction with each other, is one of the more complex and contentious issues in sociolinguistics today (Kramerae 1981; Tannen 1990,1993). Many studies concerning the language of males and females have tried to determine to what extent they differ and their effects within particular contexts (Lakoff 1975; Kramerae 1975; Thome et al. 1975). However the role of gender within argumentative discourse has yet to be fully investigated in spite of its potential implications for intra and inter-cultural communication. In addition, the effect of gender composition within a group of interactants has not been comprehensively addressed.

While previous research has tended to examine the issue of gender separately from argumentative discourse, this has produced an extensive body of knowledge upon which to investigate the role the former plays in influencing argumentative discourse. In this case, specifically the discourse of Chilean Spanish speakers.

Theoretical Background

Argumentative discourse can be described as a speech activity of opposition during which participants demonstrate their dissension towards the actions and utterances of others by employing certain linguistic strategies, all within the conversational framework of turn taking.

Researchers (Goodwin 1987; Tannen 1984) have studied the social function of arguments concerning ideas, exemplified by Schifffrin's theory (1984) that some group members can disagree and compete in a non serious way using strategies that show solidarity and protect intimacy. Paralinguistic and prosodic features also provide valuable information to this end, indicating how speakers intend their utterances to be interpreted, in line with their perception of argument function (Gumperz 1977).

There are a number of constraining factors that determine how an argument is carried out by participants. The sociological variables of social distance, relative power and absolute ranking (Brown and Levinson 1987) are of primary importance, along with the factors of ethnicity and geographical region, social class, age, gender, situation or context, chosen topic, participant relations and orientations, considerations of utility and linguistic devices (Grimshaw 1990). García (1989) and Cordella (1996) have highlighted discourse style differences that are present in both English (American and Australian) and Spanish (Latin American).

In relation to gender, previous studies have found that women are more socio-emotional, relational and affiliative, while men are more instrumental, task-oriented and assertive. Two main areas of contention have been the focus of numerous studies, being critically reviewed by James & Drakich (1993) and James & Clarke (1993). The former concluded that most research indicates men frequently do talk more than women in mixed-sex interaction but this is not necessarily always the case. James & Clarke (1993) reported no significant differences between the genders in the amount of interruptions made, in either single-sex or mixed-sex interaction.

The Investigation

Males and females discourse styles were not analysed *per se*, but instead argumentative discourse examined to determine the effect of gender on the selection of linguistic strategies of camaraderie.

It can be seen from the studies already carried out that there are tendencies for Anglo-Saxon males and females to prefer certain linguistic strategies of camaraderie. This investigation was aimed at determining whether Chilean males and females also have gender-preferential tendencies during argumentative discourse, thus adding to the growing amount of literature on the effect of gender within different contexts.

The findings are part of a larger investigation concerning Chilean argumentative discourse between friends which was carried out at the Universidad de Chile in Santiago, Chile during 1995.¹ A corpus of 20 (mainly third and fourth year) male and female university students were selected to participate in group conversations with three other friends, discussing in Spanish the topic: "What are the situations of discrimination that a woman experiences in this society?" Five subgroups of participants were chosen according to gender and existing friendship networks (these had generally been in existence for 2 to 3 years). Each participant belonged exclusively to one group.

For the purpose of the investigation we selected only three groups (a total of twelve speakers) to analyse in depth because their conversation contained large sections of argumentative discourse while allowing for a methodologically balanced examination of the gender variable. The groups are represented as follows:

G1: comprised three males and one female (symbolised by
♂[3] ♀[1])

G2: comprised three females and one male (symbolised by
♀[3] ♂[1])

G3: comprised two males and two females (symbolised by
♂[2] ♀[2])

The conversations were then transcribed and analysed. Six of the original twenty-two linguistic strategies identified in the discourse of G1 (♂[3] ♀[1]), G2 (♀[3] ♂[1]) and G3 (♂[2] ♀[2]) will form the basis of this article. The following linguistics strategies (which we have classified as "linguistic strategies of camaraderie" due to their underlying purpose)

will be analysed and interpreted: overlap, latching, backchannelling, supportive moves, repetition of others and joint sentence construction.

Method

We compared both mean and variability of linguistic strategy use. Mean frequencies of linguistic strategy use were compared between members of the same and different sexes, within and between groups. The variability value was compared between members of the same or opposite sex across groups. We used the coefficient of variation (CV = standard deviation/mean) which is a measure of variability in the data relative to the mean.

The coefficient of variation was only calculated in those cases where measuring variability is possible; i.e. when there is more than one member of a particular sex in the group. Larger values of the coefficient of variation mean that the members of the same sex in the group were more divergent in their strategy use than members of the same or opposite sex in other groups. Higher divergence may occur when one individual uses a strategy more or less frequently compared to the other members of the group. Comments were only given in cases where differences were most noticeable.

Linguistic Strategies and their Use

Below we describe the frequency of strategy use among the three groups and give an interpretation in the context of Chilean friends debating in their mother tongue.

Overlap - a second person speaks over the first to show involvement. This may or may not be an attempt to take the floor. For example:²

EXAMPLE 1

G1 (†[1]↗[3])

†1: sí pero // es es un porcentaje bastante alto ah de mujeres (1) están // trabajando

↗2: no pero imagínate además]

↗3: es trágico pero es verdad cachái]

†1: ahora y están haciendo] profesionales

- ‡1: yes but // it's it's a fairly high percentage ah of women (1) they are now // working
 ⌘2: no but imagine as well]
 ⌘3: it's tragic but it's true, you see]
 ‡1: and are becoming] professionals

TABLE 1

Mean value

G1	⌘[3]	‡[1]	G2	‡[3]	⌘[1]	G3	⌘[2]	‡[2]
	23.3	28		21.6	10		15	11

TABLE 2

Coefficient of Variation

Males in G1 (⌘[3] ‡[1])	Females in G2 (‡[3] ⌘[1])	Males in G3 (⌘[2] ‡[2])	Females in G3 (⌘[2] ‡[2])
0.47	0.31	0.37	0.50

Overall, females use this strategy slightly more than males. Yet females tend to decrease their use of overlap in a balanced gender ratio group. At the same time, this grouping makes them become variable in their use of overlap.

Latching - a second speaker begins his or her utterance immediately after the first, leaving little or no pause. This indicates their enthusiasm and involvement in the discourse and may be used instead of overlap. For example:

EXAMPLE 2

G1 ⌘[3] ‡[1]

- ⌘2: bueno en eso como patrón estamos claro yo creo (1) que hay discriminación y ha existido historicamente=
 ‡1: =sí el problema es que yo no soy de tendencia muy feminista (1) yo lo reconozco pero=
 ⌘2: =pero no hay de ser de // tendencia feminista para reconocer que hay hay discriminación

- ♂2: well we agree that this is the norm I think (1) that there is discrimination and it has existed historically=
 ♀1: =yes the problem is that I'm not of a very feminist tendency (1) and I recognise this but=
 ♂2: =but one doesn't need to be of a // feminist tendency to recognise that there is there is discrimination

TABLE 3
Mean value

G1	♂[3]	♀[1]	G2	♀[3]	♂[1]	G3	♂[2]	♀[2]
	2	3		1.3	1		7.5	3

TABLE 4
Coefficient of Variation

Males in G1 (♂[3] ♀[1])	Females in G2 (♀[3] ♂[1])	Males in G3 (♂[2] ♀[2])	Females in G3 (♂[2] ♀[2])
1	0.38	0.28	0.46

The data shows that females may use this strategy slightly more often than males, except in a balanced gender ratio group. Male variability appears to be correlated to the gender ratio of the group. Males exhibit higher variability when they are majority than when they are in a balanced gender ratio group.

Backchannelling - a participant communicates agreement with the speaker without interrupting their turn. These short utterances reflect appreciation of what is being said. For example:

EXAMPLE 3

G3 (♂[2] ♀[2])

- ♀1: // porque] tiene que tener su guagua entonces va a tener que congelar (los estudios) o va a tener que salirse // no más]
 ♂2: que que claro (1)] abandonar la carera
 ♀1: // claro] en cambio el hombre puede seguir terminando la carrera y hacer su ()
 ♂1: claro]

- ‡1: // because] she has to have her child so she has to defer (her studies) or she has to to drop out // quite simply]
- ∅2: to to for sure (1)] abandon the course
- ‡1: // for sure] on the other hand the man can continue finishing his course and do his ()
- ∅1: for sure]

TABLE 5

Mean value

G1	∅[3]	‡[1]	G2	‡[3]	∅[1]	G3	∅[2]	‡[2]
	1.3	9		7	4		4.5	4

TABLE 6

Coefficient of Variation

Males in G1 (∅[3] ‡[1])	Females in G2 (‡[3] ∅[1])	Males in G3 (∅[2] ‡[2])	Females in G3 (∅[2] ‡[2])
1.15	0.28	0.46	0.70

It appears that females employ backchannelling overall more often than males except in the balanced gender ratio group. Participants tend to vary their usage depending on the gender ratio of the group.

Supportive Moves - agreeing with the speaker as in a backchannelled comment but this is instead framed as a separate contribution. For example:

EXAMPLE 4

G1 (∅[3] ‡[1])

- ∅3: ah mira (1) hay mujeres que se preparan para ser esposas (no) cierto (2) y no para (1)
- ‡1: sí
- ∅3: desa- desarrollarse integralmente como mujeres
- ‡1: uh huh (1) si estoy de acuerdo=
- ∅3: hey listen (1) there are women who prepare themselves to be wives isn't that right

‡1: yes

↗ 3: (2) and not to (1) completely de- develop themselves as women

‡ 1: uh huh (1) yes I agree=

TABLE 7

Mean value

G1	↗[3]	‡[1]	G2	‡[3]	↗[1]	G3	↗[2]	‡[2]
	2.3	11		8	6		11.5	5

TABLE 8

Coefficient of Variation

Males in G1 (↗[3] ‡[1])	Females in G2 (‡[3] ↗[1])	Males in G3 (↗[2] ‡[2])	Females in G3 (↗[2] ‡[2])
0.86	0.25	0.18	0.28

Females in G1 and G2 use supportive moves on average more often than males, while the reverse is true in G3. Male variability is highly affected by group composition.

Repetition of Others - when speakers, individually or in tandem, repeat the same message, using an exact or similar format. This emphasises speaker agreement and similarity. For example:

EXAMPLE 5

G1 (↗[2] ‡[2])

↗2: // en la claro (1) en la (universidad) Andrés Bello

↗1: la Andrés Bello]

‡1: la Andrés Bello sí

↗2: // in the of course (1) in the Andrés Bello (university)

↗1: the Andrés Bello]

‡1: the Andrés Bello yes

TABLE 9*Mean value*

G1	♂[3]	♀[1]	G2	♀[3]	♂[1]	G3	♂[2]	♀[2]
	7.3	9		8.6	3		5	2

TABLE 10*Coefficient of Variation*

Males in G1 (♂[3] ♀[1])	Females in G2 (♀[3] ♂[1])	Males in G3 (♂[2] ♀[2])	Females in G3 (♂[2] ♀[2])
0.27	0.40	0.56	0.70

Females have a higher overall use of repetition except in the balanced gender ratio group. Both male and female variability augments in a balanced gender ratio group.

Joint Sentence Construction - a second speaker finishes constructing the first speaker's sentence with perfect timing. This underlines speaker involvement and understanding. For example:

EXAMPLE 6

G3 (♂[2] ♀[2])

♂2: se han claro (1) se han confundido las cosas=

♀2: =() ganar el espacio con con (1) con con hacer una lucha con=

♂2: =con liberarse

♂2: they have for sure (1) they have confused things=

♀2: =() winning space with with (1) with with fighting a battle with=

♂2: =with liberating oneself

TABLE 11*Mean value*

G1	♂[3]	♀[1]	G2	♀[3]	♂[1]	G3	♂[2]	♀[2]
	1.3	0		1.3	0		2.5	2.5

TABLE 12

Coefficient of Variation

Males in G1 (♂[3] ♀[1])	Females in G2 (♀[3] ♂[1])	Males in G3 (♂[2] ♀[2])	Females in G3 (♂[2] ♀[2])
0.84	1.15	1.40	0.28

Both males and females probably employ joint sentence construction to the same extent but the rates at which they employ it reflect the group's gender ratio. Males and females are not inclined to use this strategy when they are in the minority. The largest difference within a single sex is found with females, who show higher variability in the unbalanced rather than the balanced gender ratio group.

Discussion

This study has shown that the gender composition of a group may determine the frequency with which participants use a particular strategy. It appears that what is relevant here is not only a dyad analysis of the discourse being produced, disregarding the composition of the whole group, but rather an analysis of the outcome achieved by a particular dyad in a specific gender ratio combination.

While females favour using a number of strategies such as overlap, latching, backchannelling, supportive moves, and repetition of others in the situations of G1 and G2, they generally decrease their use in a balanced gender ratio group. Males in contrast increase their usage of latching and supportive moves in this grouping.

Males as a whole tend to be more inclined to vary their use of certain strategies when they are the majority sex represented in the group. This applies to latching, backchannelling, supportive moves, and joint sentence construction.

In a balanced gender ratio group it appears that females may accommodate their use of overlap, backchannelling, supportive moves and repetition of others to make it more equitable with that of males. This linguistic behaviour may indicate that females are sensitive to group dynamics. It can be hypothesised that in a balanced gender ratio group there needs to be fairly balanced strategy use between males and females, in order to facilitate group relations and harmony, as by working

together participants create an atmosphere of camaraderie. For this reason, females may purposely reduce their strategy use in order to give males the chance to develop theirs. This can be seen in the case of latching and supportive moves, where male use increases significantly.

Another explanation could be that females do not wish to be seen as dominant in their strategy use. This might be related to a socio/cultural notion that males should be given different discourse privileges. This idea needs to be investigated further.

We have seen that males tend to vary their strategy usage in G1 more than in a balanced gender ratio group. This could be done unconsciously and very subtly as a means to exercise power in the group and to show to the single female who is the leader. A related investigation of leadership and group dynamics (Cordella and Forbes 1998) supports this point.

Further studies should investigate a larger corpus with groups ranging in number of participants, age and educational background to determine to what extent these variables play a role in the selection and modulation of linguistic strategies of camaraderie, and to attest whether this modulation is dependant upon the gender composition of the group for all variables of age and educational background.

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² The method of transcription has been adapted from Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974).

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